

## **New Language of Cancer**

### **Introduction**

Cancer is one of the life events that leaves people confused on what to say, how to act, and what to do. This is not only true for the cancer patient, but for caregivers, the medical community, and the interested and uninterested public. War metaphors have often been deployed (pun intended) in lieu of awkward silence.

Aristotle described metaphor as "giving something a name that belongs to something else" (Penson 712). Metaphors are often used to illustrate complex issues in an understandable way. However, metaphors can also be dangerous, creating stereotypes and stigma.

John Donne wrote *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* in 1627 describing his illness as "a cannon shot and siege" (Penson 713). Nursing in the 18th century was characterized by war metaphors: orders, stations, ranks, and shots. Nurses were awarded insignia pins and stripes. Hippocrates talks of the "violence" of disease. On December 23, 1971, President Nixon signed the National Cancer Act (NCA) and declared "war on cancer." With the NCA, so emerged war as metaphor for cancer.

### **Language of Cancer**

No wants to hear those three little words "you've got cancer," yet, according to the National Cancer Institute one in three Americans will. A cancer diagnosis can feel more like an indoctrination into medical mayhem. And with that comes an entirely new language: attack, battle, war, fight. People think nothing of telling someone with cancer "you'll beat it" or "you're strong, keep fighting." When someone dies from cancer, we read in the obituary "he lost his battle with cancer."

Psychologists warn that war metaphors are often associated with death and dying. When these metaphors are imposed, the cancer patient can be left feeling that somehow it was their fault they will die from cancer; they didn't do everything otherwise they would have survived cancer. This often leads to continuing futile medical treatments rather than accepting hospice and end-of-life care.

Cancer is insidious. It steals lives and the lives it takes have very little say over whether they will live after cancer or die from cancer. It is not a battle. It is a disease.

A recent study conducted by Demmen, et al. delineated the use of violent metaphors by stakeholder group: patients, caregivers, and professionals. "Battle" was used most frequently by caregivers (67), followed by patients (61) and then professionals (11). "Fight" was used most frequently by patients (204), caregivers (172), and professionals (36). Professionals used "protect," "confront," and "break." While it seems that cancer patients are perpetuating the use of war metaphors, several studies suggest this is actually harmful. Additionally, patient blogs and personal and professional opinion suggest these words are repulsive. Alice Payne writes that when people told her she would make it because she was strong, she wanted to ask "Okay, if I die does that mean I was weak?"

In Nancy Stordahl's blog *Nine Cancer Language Traps*, war metaphors and phrases are third on the list, behind calling cancer a gift or blessing (first) and stay positive (second). She describes war metaphors as fight, warrior, win/lose, battle talk, victorious, and surrender. According to researcher David J. Hauser, these metaphors can lead to aggressive treatment regimens with little thought or consideration to watchful waiting and palliative care strategies that might be helpful and increase longevity. His research showed that language that framed cancer as an "enemy" led to significantly less attention to preventative behaviors. Often those that view cancer as an enemy rather than a challenge are ill equipped to cope with the disease.

In a blog by Dana Jennings, he writes "... after staggering through prostate cancer and its treatment ... the words 'fight' and 'battle' make me cringe and bristle. How can it be a battle when we patients are the actual battleground? We become a wasteland, at once infested by the black dust of cancer and damaged by the 'friendly fire' of treatment. And ordinary language falls far short of explaining that keen sense of oblivion." Based on my experience with a cancer diagnosis and working with cancer patients, I do not believe Mr. Jennings is off-track. In fact, his argument should be at the forefront of

modern discussion about the language of cancer instead of falling back on metaphors and phrases used out of routine.

Often the military metaphors are replaced with journey metaphors. The journey metaphor at least offers a path for those diagnosed to follow. Journey implies a part of one's life, rather than a whole life. In many respects this is more accurate. Cancer takes just a moment of one's whole life. This is true for the person that lives after cancer treatment or dies from cancer. Contrast that with war metaphors that imply a do or die situation. Although some do not agree with or like the word journey. As a culture, the word implies something fun or rememberable. Cancer, if nothing else, is rememberable, but fun? Psychologies propose that the idea of fighting or battling cancer is akin to the seriousness and invasiveness of the disease. It communicates a "sense of terror and fear, a sense of disconnection, a sense of captivity" (Harrington, 2012). War metaphors set up the premise of a strong enemy to be vanquished.

### **A New Way of Thinking**

Word choices may be giving cancer more power than it deserves. In an article by Faith Frankel she suggests shifting our thoughts to annoyance of having cancer rather terrified by it. She reminds us that cancer is a diagnosis, a disease. She recommends "I was diagnosed with" rather than "I have." Shortly after cancer treatment – when my hair was about two inches long – I was a model for a book of inspiration to be distributed to cancer centers throughout Colorado. Each photographer was assigned to three current or former cancer patients. Of the three of us, I would live. My two "photo-mates" would both die from cancer just a few years after the photoshoot. Both of those women had small kids. All three of us were the same age. I had been diagnosed with cancer. They had cancer ... and they died with cancer. My cancer was an annoyance for nine months of my life plus two to three surgeries for the first five years post-treatment. Oddly, neither of my photo-mates were terrified. One was determined to "win" a losing game of misguided fate. The other with complete resolve. She would be the first to go.

I am often asked my opinion on war metaphors. I do not like them. Until this paper, I had not given much thought as to why – it was visceral; a complete and utter distaste. Especially the word survivor. What the hell did I survive? And, if this is survival, I don't want it! After fourteen surgeries, four and half months of chemotherapy, and six weeks of radiation I certainly don't feel like I survived. I feel defeated. If it was a battle, cancer won. I may be living, but I am not the same person I was on April 23, 2009 – the day before cancer consumed my existence. But I cannot talk about how I really feel. I lived. Frankel suggests "dealing with cancer." Once diagnosed, a person deals with cancer for the remainder of their life. Every medical form has that magic box "☐ cancer." It's everywhere – massage intake forms, the eye doctor, the medical doctor, the DMV. Forget donating blood; no one wants "cancer" blood.

Where I agree with Frankel is that we give cancer power with the words we use. Let's stop. Jennings writes "[c]ancer simply is. There is no malice or intent with cancer. Cells mutated and [my body] became a host organism. It's actually a natural process." That is exactly what cancer is and what it does. It's a one-way relationship. It takes; the body delivers. There is no battle involved. Cancer is an opportunistic feeder. Given the choice, it will feed.

I love working with the dying. I learn the most from the beautiful individuals leaving this world. My first client that died was in her mid-fifties. Her name was Virginia. She was single, never married, and had no children. She worked in the controller's office for the city of Aspen in Colorado. I saw her on a Thursday morning. She was in a wheelchair with short salt-and-pepper hair and bit rotund. I struggled to lift her onto the massage table. She was in a lot of pain. She disclosed that she had breast cancer that had spread to her liver. I asked her if she was undergoing any treatment currently. She said she was waiting to hear results of a liver test to see if there was something that could be done. If so, she would begin treatment the following week. During the massage, her phone rang, rang again, and rang again. I asked her if she would like me to hand her the phone. She said no. She said that the phone call was the results of the liver test. She then told me there was nothing they could do – she knew this in her being; she did

not have to answer the phone. She then said the words that stick with me today "this is the last time I will get a massage. I want to enjoy every moment of it." Virginia died the following Monday evening alone in a hospital in Aspen. She didn't win or lose. She died. She lived a beautiful life of her choosing and then she died. The obituary read: Virginal [last name] died in Aspen, Colorado. She worked for the City of Aspen ....

I planted a packet of wildflowers I called "Virginia." And with each subsequent client or friend that died, I planted another packet of wildflowers called "Mary Lou," "Joan," "Lynn," "Michelle," "TK" ... I've planted about twenty packets of wildflowers.

It is the people left behind that struggle to find meaning as to why their friend/relative/loved one did not live. These people need something to hold onto, to grasp. For those left behind losing a battle makes sense. Cancer won and it took my beautiful [wife/husband/daughter/friend] from me. And I'm pissed! Lynn was a yoga student of mine that I had not seen for a year. She called and asked if I still massaged people with cancer. I saw Lynn three more times, a Tuesday, a Thursday, and the Monday morning she died. Her husband asked what he should do. He was filling her with prescription medications for intense pain. I knew Lynn was so close to dying. Her liver stopped working and she was literally gray. I told him to take Lynn to the hospital. At two that morning my phone rang. All he said was "Lynn died." He sobbed and I listened to him cry for almost an hour. Without another word he hung up the phone. He taught me the intensity of losing someone that you love with absolutely everything in your being. He needed cancer to be a war that beat Lynn – an entire army.

### Conclusion

The new language of cancer is simple and succinct. I was diagnosed with cancer. I had cancer treatment/I am in treatment for cancer. I finished treatment for cancer/I am finished with cancer treatment. [Insert name] died. That is what happened. The person was diagnosed with cancer, had cancer treatment, finished cancer treatment, lived or died. Assigning words like battle, war, and survivor, give cancer opportunity. That language leaves cancer in the lurk, waiting to pounce again.

Alternative medicine addresses cancer as an imbalance, not an attack. It was not until 1971, and perpetuated through the cold war, that war metaphors became synonymous with cancer, largely in an effort for funding. Penson, et al. suggest that "metaphors help bring the patient's subjective view of illness into the forefront of the medical encounter, give meaning to the experience, and allow the doctor and patient to strengthen the therapeutic alliance around a shared vision." However, metaphors need to be suitable to the context. The purpose of metaphors is to describe an unfamiliar or abstract concept in a way that makes sense to the listener. Doctors and patients should decide what terminology works best between them. And as for the interested and uninterested public, well that might be an uphill battle (I had to do it).

## References

- Burnside JW. Medicine and war. *JAMA*. 1983;249(15):2091. doi:10.1001/jama.1983.03330390083043.
- Demmen J, Semino E, Demjen Z, et al. A computer-assisted study of the use of violent metaphors for cancer and end of life by patients, family carers, and health professionals. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*. 2015;20(2):205-231. doi: 10.1075/ijcl.20.2.03dem.
- Frankel F. The language of cancer: Do our word choices give cancer more power that it deserves? *Conquer: The Patient Voice*. October 2015. Vol 1 No 5. conquer-magazine.com/issues/2015/vol-1-no-5-october-2015/296-the-language-of-cancer-do-our-word-choices-give-cancer-more-power-than-it-deserves.
- George S. The language of cancer. *Cancer Today*. June 26, 2015. [cancertodaymag.org/Pages/Summer2015/The-Language-of-Cancer-War-Metaphors-David-J-Hauser.aspx](http://cancertodaymag.org/Pages/Summer2015/The-Language-of-Cancer-War-Metaphors-David-J-Hauser.aspx).
- Harrington KJ, The use of metaphor in discourse about cancer: A review of the literature. *Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing*. August 2012;16(4):408-12.
- Hauser DJ, Schwarz N. The war on prevention II: Battle metaphors undermine cancer treatment and prevention and do not increase vigilance. *Health Community*. September 2019;9:1-7. doi: 10.1080/10410236.2019.1663465.
- Hurley KE. To fight, or not to fight: A cancer psychotherapist with cancer confronts the battle metaphor. *Journal of Women and Therapy*. July 2014;37(3-4):311-318. doi: 10.1080/02703149.2014.897556.
- Jennings D. With cancer, let's face it: Words are inadequate. *The New York Times*. March 15, 2010;4:47pm. [well.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/15/with-cancer-lets-face-it-words-are-inadequate/](http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/15/with-cancer-lets-face-it-words-are-inadequate/)
- Kruijff S, Van Zweden C. The harmful impact of the rhetoric "war on cancer". *European Journal of Surgical Oncology*. June 2017;43(6):963-964. DOI: 10.1016/j.ejso.2017.03.008.
- Malm H. Military metaphors and their contribution to the problems of overdiagnosis and overtreatment in the "war" against cancer. *American Journal of Bioethics*. October 2016;16(10):19-21. doi: 10.1080/15265161.2016.1214331.
- Oronsky BT, Carter CA, Oronsky AL, Salacz ME, Reid T. "No patient left behind": An alternative to "the war on cancer" metaphor. *Medical Oncology*. June 2016;33(6):55. doi: 10.1007/s12032-016-0769-1.
- Parikh RB, Kirch RA, Brawley OW. Advancing the quality-of-life agenda in cancer advocacy: Beyond the war metaphor. *JAMA*. 2015;1(4):423-424. doi: 10.1001/jamaoncol.2015.0925.
- Penson RT, Schapira L, Daniels KJ, Chabner BA, Lynch TJ Jr. Cancer as metaphor. *Oncologist*. 2004;9(6):708-16. DOI: 10.1634/theoncologist.9-6-708.
- Semino E, Demjen Z, Demmen J, et al. The online use of violence and journey metaphors by patients with cancer, as compared with health professionals: A mixed methods study. *BMJ Support and Palliative Care*. March 2017;7(1):60-66. doi: 10.1136/bmjspcare-2014-000785.

Stordahl N. "Nice cancer language traps." Nancy's Point: A blog about breast cancer and loss. January 15, 2015. [nancyspoint.com/nine-cancer-language-traps/](http://nancyspoint.com/nine-cancer-language-traps/).

Zetterström M. "The battlefield of the human body revisited – metaphors and cancer: a comparison between genres." Stockholms University, Dept. of English, Bachelor Degree Project, English Linguistics. Spring 2013.